Geoffrey Parkes

University of Southern Queensland

PUTTING IT TOGETHER: ALBERT CAMUS, MICHEL FOUCAULT AND AN ETHICS OF THE SELF

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Abstract: *Throughout modernity, the postmodern, and its aftermath, the self, its forms of existence and its very existence have been questioned. But what if, as Jonathan Dollimore writes, "the neuroses, anxiety and alienation associated with the self in crisis are not as much the consequences of its recent breakdown as the very stuff of its creation, and of the culture – Western European Culture – which is sustains?"*
And what if we review the works of Albert Camus and Michel Foucault in this context, analysing their works as both works on the self (oeuvre) and works on their selves (travailler)? What are the parallels between these dissimilar icons of post-Holocaust French thought and how might their being read together aid our understanding of what it means to craft an ethics of the self?This paper draws on my research into the possibilities of a post-Holocaust ethics of the self, using two writers whose work has been marginalised in the "turn to ethics". By viewing their work in relation to events of their own time and their engagement with debates about the self, we see their importance in contemporary discussions and the value of their self-reflexive action and radical scepticism in crafting our selves.

On a superficial level, it would be easy to assert that the work of Albert Camus had little in common with that of Michel Foucault. Though both shared an attitude of animosity to Jean Paul Sartre's work and public persona, in the public imagination little else is offered to link them. By the time Foucault's work on the self was puzzling an audience used to the decimation of Man and the destabilisation of humanism's progressive discourse, Camus had long faded into a Gauloises haze, confined, in the public mind, to an association with an existentialism he eschewed at every opportunity during his life. Remembered primarily for *L'Etranger*, perhaps the least understood book ever cited as holiday reading by George W Bush, Camus's oeuvre, and in particular his philosophy of the absurd had come to be seen, until recently, as the disturbing "combination of nobility without lucidity" (Hochberg 101).

And what connection could there be between a man who saw humanity as its own greatest hope and demon, and one who, it seemed, wanted to do away with humanity altogether? I will answer these questions first by examining the contours of Foucault's work on the care of the self and the concepts of a work on the self (*travail*) and a work of the self (*oeuvre*). From there I will trace some thematic links that drew Camus and Foucault closer together before examining how Camus's oeuvre works on itself, and how the shifting and ultimately self-reflexive scepticism of Camus's work can be seen as an exemplary, albeit cautious, example of what Foucault saw as the practice of resistance and transformation that the modern self could enact.

By the time the final two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* had appeared in 1984, Michel Foucault had spent almost eight years thinking through the questions he first posed in a book review in 1978: "Who are we in this present, what is this fragile moment from which we can't detach our identity and which will carry that identity away with itself?" (qtd in Rabinow xviii). After the success of *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, few expected Foucault to follow with what were, on the surface, tomes dedicated to a historic survey of Ancient Greek and Roman

codes and practices, let alone what was clearly a focus on the self, a concept with which he, alongside fellow post-structuralists, were charged with destroying. Both volumes, along with material from his lectures in Berkeley, Paris and Vermont, and interviews spanning his final years, show how deeply Foucault's concern with the self, and its role in relations of power, reached and reshaped his work. Subsequent critical work has seen much of Foucault's earlier work reframed through the self and how it had "been objectified through scientific inquiry… and dividing practices" (Martin et al 3).

Foucault himself stated his work concerned four technologies, or ways that we came to have knowledge of ourselves. These were:

> technologies of production…. technologies of sign systems…technologies of power… [and finally] technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conducts and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality ("Technologies" 18).

These technologies often worked together, but Foucault mused:

> Perhaps I've insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of the self ("Technologies" 19).

Foucault came to the view that the Greek principle "take care of oneself" had been unfortunately overshadowed by "know yourself", a motto later transformed by Christian practice into a practice of renouncing oneself to achieve salvation (*Technologies* 22). Part of seriously taking care of oneself, argued Foucault, was writing or "taking notes on oneself to be read, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed" (*Technologies* 27).

Perhaps now is the time for a biblio/biographical interjection – Camus's work depended on his notebooks (his earliest notes see him calling on himself "to tame my sensibility, too ready to overflow. For hiding it under irony and coolness I thought I was the master. Now I must sing a different tune" - qtd in Lottman 61). Many of them were subsequently published, and they contain as many insights into the gestation of his novels, plays and works of non-fiction as they do of the man who wrote them. He also mastered the art of the essay whilst working for the Resistance newspaper *Combat* – it was in these writings and his later essays and letters where his transformation would appear most obvious; from the seminal "Neither Victims nor Executioners" and "Letters to a German Friend" to his final attempts at clarifying what would happen to the peoples of Europe, to survivors, and to France at the end of the war and during the subsequent reconstruction. His work was a conversation with his readers but also with himself, a dialectical process where interrogation, scepticism and the open possibility of transformation were de rigueur.

Similarly, Michel Foucault claimed in an interview in 1982 that his problem was his own transformation:

> This transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting? (*An Interview* 131).

In his introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* he writes of:

> a group of practices that have been of unquestionable importance in our societies… [these are] the "arts of existence"… those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria (10-11).

Now several papers might well be written, given the space and time, on the irony of Foucault calling anything unquestionable. Criticism too has been focused on the possibilities of intentional and voluntary actions over one's self with regard to subjectivity – in particular Wolfgang Detel's critique in *Foucault and Classical Antiquity: Power, Ethics and Knowledge* looks carefully at Foucault's conceptualisations and his misunderstandings of the works of antiquity. However, for the purposes of this discussion we shall put these issues aside, noting that Foucault never explicitly provided a methodology or a plan to his readers concerning the self. Paul Rabinow insists instead that Foucault saw himself as contributing more "to a mode of being" (*Introduction* xxvii).

Bringing these practices to the foreground was part of that contribution. Foucault argued that these practices were "the mode in which individual freedom – or civic liberty up to a point – was reflected… as an ethics in antiquity" ("Ethics" 284). To care for one's self, he continued, was "ethically prior" to caring for others, "in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior" (*Ethics* 287). That is, when one cared properly for one's self, it led subsequently to caring for others.

So can Camus's work be seen as an ethics of the self, open to challenge and transformation, and, most importantly, to self-reflexivity? I think so, especially when viewed with the help of scholar Avi Sagi and his book *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*. Traditional scholarship has tended to frame Camus's oeuvre as beginning with the concept of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *L'Etranger* and the play *Caligula*. Camus's focus is then said to shift as a reaction to the horrors of World War II, subsequently publishing the allegorical novel *The Plague*, showing how even the absurd man does not live in a moral vacuum, and then finally renouncing his theory of the absurd and replacing it with that of revolt in *The Rebel*, a move which saw him ostracised from the Parisian intellectual and social set and his reputation dashed in a very public exile from Jean Paul Sartre's kingdom. His last novel, *The Fall*, representing a bitter condemnation of Sartre and even of himself and the failure of philosophy in real life, is often overshadowed by his death and the subsequent critical reassessment of French writers in light of the events of 1968 and their repercussions. All in all, such a view offers a compact narrative of Camus's failed potential, an interpretation, as Ronald Aronson asserts, that arose in the either/or divide of the Cold War-era Parisian milieu.

But Avi Sagi's interpretation seems more useful and productive, especially in terms of analysing an aesthetics of existence. Sagi posits that Camus's work can be seen as an attempt to deal with genuine philosophical questions, the most profound of which, he writes, was "the sense of a crumbling disintegrating reality eroding [Camus's] ontological security, as opposed to a growing yearning for harmony" (1). (Sagi may well take this term from sociologist Antony Giddens who cites this crisis of ontological security as one of the key features of modernity and the modern self.) Camus's journey from the individual and his relationship with the absurd is charted by Sagi, establishing a continuity through the turn towards the other as embodied in *The Plague* and *The Rebel*. Crucially, he sees *The Fall* as Camus casting "doubt on the ability of individuals to be released from the shackles of the self to turn to others" (2).

For Sagi, *The Fall* "is a critique of *The Rebel*" (171); along with the other works, it "reveals [Camus] as a critical thinker, willing to reexamine his positions… realiz[ing] the ideal of philosophy as a lasting pursuit". Sagi continues:

> Camus's work is an existential pilgrimage... his thought moves with the pace of life… his thought and literary oeuvre grow from and react to real life… Camus is inconsistent, since latent in experience are new insights and new understandings (172-3).

This then is the form of self-reflection crucial to the ethics of self that Camus's work attempts. In its recognition of change, the failure of over-arching answers, and its increasing engagement with the major issues of its time, Camus's ethics of the self reveal ways that we too, as modern subjects, can also change, and acknowledge failure and the necessity to look outwards as well as in. Camus's work, Sagi writes, "is a voice of struggle integrating freedom and consciousness" (174); it is the voice of a knowing,

struggling subject wrestling with its existence and rebelling against its own horrors across the duration of its life.

We can also look to Friedrich Nietzsche, who played an important role in the development and understandings of both Foucault and Camus when it came to the role of aesthetics in crafting the self. Jeffrey C Isaac notes that Camus identified "with Nietzsche's critique of the self-assured modern sovereign self", a critique particularly resonant in Camus's earlier works including *The Myth of Sisyphus* (98). However, as with some of Foucault's Grecian practitioners, Camus's absurd man was well aware of limits and responsibilities (98), and his emphasis on a more productive nihilism saw Camus's emphasis move away from the German's concept of the *übermensch*. Foucault too would claim Nietzsche as one whose work laid claim to him; Foucault described Bataille, Blanchot, Klossowski and Nietzsche as tearing "the subject away from itself" (qtd in O'Leary 141). Indeed, Foucault would write of his own books as:

> direct experiences which aim to tear me away from myself… I am an experimenter…. In the sense that I write in order to change myself, and in order to no longer think the same thing as before (141).

Paul Allen Miller's recent work *Postmodern Spiritual Practices: The Construction of the Subject and the Reception of Plato in Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault* also concretes the dialogic nature of French intellectual practice throughout the twentieth century. By their use of Hellenic history and philosophy, Miller argues, Camus, Foucault and others engaged in a conversation across history, with the Greeks, with the French intellectual establishment as well as with each other. "The stakes, then, " of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault's "encounter with the Platonic dialogues," writes Miller, "are of central importance not only to an understanding of postwar French intellectual culture… but also to the most basic ethical and political concerns facing us today" (2). Neither Camus's nor Foucault's work took place in an empty social sphere, nor were their investigations of the past an empty academic exercise. As Miller concludes, "it is in this labor of unflinching examination that the real nucleus of resistance and the real urgency of Foucault's reading of ancient philosophy can be found" (235).

Like Camus's work then, Foucault's were a working of the self, on the self, out of the self, into something other. They both came to practice a philosophy of living as a way of life, different in some respects, but equally self-critical, equally committed to avoiding the practices of the self that modernity and the confessional subject had combined to unleash. For both of them there could be no transcendence of the present, neither a future of utopic bliss nor a return to some glorious past. A self-reflexive, sceptical and critical transformation of the self's material – its self – was the way through.

So in 2008 what are the implications of this work on the self as outlined and undertaken to some extent by both Camus and Foucault? Since early this decade, both have had their work come under increasing scrutiny for its political implications – David Frum, the man who coined most of the phrase "the axis of evil", recently declared Foucault a not-so closeted supporter of the Iranian regime and Islam exactly because of Islam's attitude to sex (*David Frum's Diary*); in 2006 George W Bush provoked a flurry of interest in Camus when it was revealed he took *L'Etranger* with him as holiday reading (McDonald) and Ronald Aronson notes Camus's reputation was already being revised in the wake of communism's collapse and the subsequent emphasis on liberal individualism (231-2). However, much more work has recently focused on Foucault's later works on the self – not so much a reclamation of Foucault for humanism (or vice versa), but as an explication of these works, steeped in scepticism and critical inquiry, emerge as part of, rather than opposed to, the Enlightenment project. When combined with Camus's work, beginning with *The Myth of Sisyphus* through to *The Fall*, we can see evidence of a different path than one trod by identity politicians and postmodernists in the eighties and nineties. It is not a path of transcendent liberation, but one of self-reflexive evisceration, a transformation that sees Foucault and Camus understanding the role of an aesthetic philosophy of life, a lived philosophy that never settles for simple answers. This is a philosophy of engagement, unsettlement, and preoccupation, far from the claims of nihilism levelled at them both. As fundamentalisms and nationalisms rise again as modernity's progeny, the oeuvre and travail of Foucault and Camus may just provide us with a practice

of the self that is mindful, personal and plural; a way of continuing the questions "what is it to live and who have we become?" in an age where simple answers seek and serve a very different will to power.

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